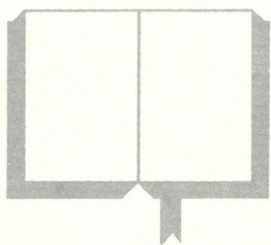


A
CHRISTIAN
DECLARATION
ON

THE
AUTHORITY
OF THE
SCRIPTURES



GENERAL CONFERENCE
MENNONITE CHURCH

A statement on the authority of the Scriptures representing the position taken by the General Conference Mennonite Church at its 1962 triennial conference at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, expressing its faith and serving as a guide and basis for further study by the district conferences and local churches.

Since the early Anabaptist movement was the result of a rediscovery of the Scriptures as the revealed word of God and authoritative in all matters of faith and practice;

Since there is in our time much confusion, uncertainty, and divergent opinion concerning the inspiration and authority of Scripture;

And because we are in need of a positive statement with regard to the authority and inspiration of Scripture in order to strengthen the church in such a way as to give spiritual unity and power in proclamation;

Be it resolved that we accept the following affirmation of faith with respect to the authority and inspiration of Scripture.

1. We affirm that ultimate truth and life are to be found only in God and that all truth, therefore, is of necessity one and indivisible.

2. We believe that though God revealed himself in nature, the fall of man into sin made necessary a special divine revelation in order that man might receive a true knowledge of God.

3. This special self-revelation of God, which was begun in His revelation of himself to Israel, was ultimately fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. The meaning of the once-for-all events of God's revelation in both the Old and New Covenant for the salvation of mankind were interpreted for us by Jesus Christ and the writers of Scripture.

4. We believe that holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Spirit of God, thus securing for the church the Scriptures in such a way that the church may trust its verbal form

as an adequate, authentic, and sufficient vehicle of divine revelation.

5. We believe that the witness to the revelatory events of God in Christ and their meaning for us were guarded over by the apostles in the early church, after which this apostolic witness was authentically recorded by the New Testament writers. Thus the authentic witness to God's work of salvation in Christ was laid down in Scripture for all time.

6. We acknowledge that the Bible was written by men chosen by God in a specific period in history and that their writings share certain characteristics of all other human documents. Since God in His sovereign will has chosen the biblical books as a means of imparting to man His message of salvation, their human character, their multiplicity, and their form cannot be considered as impairing the truth and efficacy of the Bible.

7. We believe that the Spirit of God working through the church established the canon, thus binding the church to the witness of the writers of the Bible and thereby making it the keeper and guardian of a historical testimony which she can neither alter nor augment.

8. We believe that the full revelation of God made in His disclosure of himself to Israel and through Jesus Christ His Son is accessible to us ultimately only through the Holy Scriptures and is our final infallible authority in all matters of faith and practice.

9. We believe that the church must continue to place herself under the authority of Jesus Christ and His word, being obedient to His will, searching the Scriptures and preaching the word as He has commanded her to do.

THE AMPLIFIED STATEMENT

This amplified statement was prepared by the Study Commission on the Inspiration of the Scriptures to clarify and elaborate on the points of the foregoing statement adopted by the Bethlehem conference. It was not presented for Conference approval, and it is not to be considered a part of the adopted statement.

Ultimate authority rests in God alone. The authority of Scripture also must finally rest in God the creator and sustainer who has spoken to us in and through Jesus Christ, His eternal Son, and cannot be separated from the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Jesus himself claimed this unique divine authority as the Son of God who is one with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. He spoke not as the prophets (who asserted a delegated, secondary authority: "Thus saith the Lord") but as one having authority ("Verily I say unto you"; cf. Mark 2:1-12; Matt. 5:22, 32, 34; Matt. 28:18). The events of our Lord's earthly ministry clearly portray that He did not only claim but actually commanded this authority in His acts of healing, His power over nature and evil spirits, in the claims to obedience that He laid on the hearts of men as well as in His power over death.

This authority was both acknowledged and proclaimed by His contemporaries. They were "astonished at his teaching; for he taught them as having authority" (Mark 1:22; cf. Matt. 7:28f.). Even those who rejected Him had to acknowledge that He acted with authority and asked by what authority He did the things He did. The recognition of this divine authority is best reflected in the confession of Peter: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16).

Christ claimed authority, however, not only for himself and His words and work, but for

the revelation of God already given in His dealings with the children of Israel interpreted by the prophets of God. He regarded the Old Testament Scriptures as having authority, for it is they that testify of Him and point to His divine mission on earth. In like manner Jesus taught the disciples the meaning of the events that had transpired in their day and these were later proclaimed by the apostles to the church and finally recorded in Scripture. A reliable and authoritative account of God's self-revelation in and through Jesus Christ, His Son, and of His teachings, work, and person are to be found only in Scripture.

That Scripture is authoritative to us is the result of a faith commitment worked in the heart and mind by the Holy Spirit through the testimony of the Scripture itself. It is self-authenticating. The authority of the Scriptures is sealed upon the hearts of believers by the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is authoritative to the Christian believer because the Spirit of God commends to him the message in his heart; the authority of the Bible is not the authority of men, nor of theories, churches, and councils, but of God. Basic, therefore, to any consideration of the authority of the Scriptures is this initial conviction or assumption of the authority of the Scriptures.

This divine authority of the Scriptures was not really questioned within the church until the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Final authority was not any longer sought exclusively in Scripture, but came to be sought in human reason, conscience, and the religious experience. The findings of higher criticism, which challenged a mechanical or dictation view of inspiration and suggested a change in our thinking with respect to the mode in which the Scriptures came into being, were confused with the content thus transmitted. As a result the authority of the Scriptures themselves was questioned. Critics became so immersed in the

study of the historical and human aspects of Scripture that they neglected the great revelatory and saving events of God to which the Scriptures give witness. Thus it was not sufficiently recognized that we can only get into touch with the revelation of God in Christ Jesus through the record of it as it is found in Scripture. In the light of this we need to affirm the authority of the Scriptures in all matters of faith and practice.

In our time there has been an increasing realization of the importance of the Scriptures for the preservation of the Christian faith and of the necessity of recognizing its authority as God's revelation to man. Because of the importance of Scripture and because differences of opinion on the nature and authority of the Scriptures have brought about a major cleavage in the body of Christ, it becomes necessary to re-examine the question of the authority of the Scriptures in the light of the new factors which have arisen. The question may be examined under the following heads: revelation, inspiration, interpretation, and our response to revelation.

I. Revelation

By revelation we mean the whole self-disclosure of God to man in whatever form that may have taken place. Two distinct kinds of revelation have therefore been recognized by the church.

First, there is general or natural revelation. General revelation is God's witness to himself for all men. It is not restricted to any one man nor to any people. It refers to the revelation God has given to man through nature, including man himself (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:19 & 20; Acts 14:17). It speaks of those truths about God that could be discovered by the unaided powers of human reason. But it is evident that man in his sin (sin has also affected his reason) does not see the works of

God's hands and does not fully discover God in nature. By general revelation we do not assert that a true knowledge of God is possible through the natural light of reason. It serves rather to point toward the need of the revelation of God in Christ in its saving character amid this human estrangement from God.

Thus, we speak of a special revelation in which God revealed His purpose and plan of salvation and His will for all men. It is that revelation used by God in conjunction with His redemption to restore to fallen man a true knowledge of God calling forth faith and obedience and a right fellowship to God. This ultimate revelation of himself to man was in Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God (Heb. 1:1, 2), "God revealed in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16). In Him the mystery previously hidden was revealed (Rom. 16:25; Heb. 9:26). True knowledge of God is saving knowledge and comes only through God's special revelation in the Scriptures and ultimately in Christ, through whom the Scriptures were fulfilled.

Special revelation is thus both an affirmation and a negation of general revelation. Until we accept the truth of God as it is revealed in Christ, we do not really see the truth as it is. Apart from this special revelation we view things from the perspective of our own selfishness. Special revelation alters our knowing of everything known before. The Christian faith is thus never an addition to natural knowledge about matters that are beyond the reach of human reason. It is rather a new seeing; a restoration of the lost power of perceiving higher truth and a correction of the distortions of the perverted natural vision.

This self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ and in Scripture is based on historical events. The historical event is the substance of which special revelation is the reflection. Special revelation parallels the redemptive action, reports it, and interprets it. In the Old Testament

it was primarily through God's great deliverance of the children of Israel out of Egypt that He revealed himself to us. Christ is the full revelation of God because He gathers up in himself all that was previously made known of the will and purpose of God, fulfills it, and completes it.

The events in which God reveals himself must find an authentic interpretation, however, before they can have any meaning for man. There must not only be an event but also the interpretation of the event. Only the revelatory word of God gives to the cross its weight and meaning. As there has been a "once for all" event in God's self-disclosure in history, so there is need also for "once for all" interpretation of these events as given by the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles.

In Hebrews 2:3b, 4 we are given insight into how this final revelation in Christ (We can equate this with the New Testament in that it deals with the Scriptures in the oral tradition just prior to being committed to writing) was authoritatively or authentically transmitted to the Hebrew Christians and so to all people for all time.

First, it is stated, "this deliverance was first announced through the lips of the Lord himself." This does not refer so much to the events as to the proclamation of the meaning of those events for man, namely, his salvation. Thus the authentic interpretation came from the Lord himself (cf. Luke 24:45-48).

The second stage of this transmission which the writer wants us to observe is how the word of God was transmitted to the writers. The writer states, in effect, that he did not receive this message directly from the Lord, but that it was "confirmed unto" them by those who heard Him.

The third stage is that of God verifying His message in history and in the lives of those who believe. God bore testimony to this word

with signs and wonders or miracles. He bore testimony to it by displaying the power of the word and last, but not least, by the power and work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. This is what we referred to earlier as the self-authenticating aspect of the Scriptures.

It is the second stage of this transmission, however, that has often been omitted in our discussions and has given rise to theories that are not rooted in the events as they transpired in the life of the early church. We must, therefore, look at this aspect again to see in what way the word of God was authentically transcribed for us by the writers of Scripture.

The second stage in transmitting to us this word of God was through the apostles to the writers. It "was confirmed unto us by them that heard him." Again, the emphasis is on an authentic transmission of an authoritative message. It lays emphasis on the historic event in that the interpretation was given to the apostles by Jesus himself in a historic situation. The writers, therefore, were not at liberty to write as they pleased, but were guided by the apostolic witness as first transmitted via oral tradition. Biblical research has shown us good reason for supposing that the tradition of the church concerning her Lord and her own origin came to be fixed within the days of the apostles of Jesus themselves, and that this tradition is in its original formulation the work of the apostles and of those who were from the beginning in the closest fellowship with them.

The writers thus wrote on the basis of this authentic apostolic witness—either recording it, as in the Gospels, or interpreting it, as in the Epistles, or by further explaining what happened when the gospel was being preached, as in Acts.

The apostles themselves were keenly aware of being called and commissioned as authoritative representatives of the Lord. Paul repeat-

edly declares himself an apostle called of God. Accordingly, evidence points to the fact that the twelve plus Paul were called and appointed to be the original and unique foundation-laying apostles of Jesus Christ. In this manner they gave to the church the authentic tradition or doctrine (Rom. 6:17; 16:17; 1 Cor. 15:1-3; 11:23; 1 Thess. 4:1, 2) and defended it when it was being perverted (Gal. 1:6-9).

The early church not only acknowledged this authority of the spoken and written words of the apostles but also treasured these documents in their midst. It was received by the church as "the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13). We may therefore say that the Lord himself saw to it that the authoritative preaching and teaching of the apostles be recorded in written form and that the church recognize, acknowledge, and preserve these writings for all time. In this manner the authentic witness to God's work of salvation in Christ was laid down in Scripture.

Since, however, as Luke suggested, many undertook to write concerning Christ, and not all are to be taken as authentic writings, we must be aware also of the work of the Spirit of God through the church selecting those writings that should be the Scriptures, i.e., the canon. The Spirit used the church to arrive at the canon and it too represents an important link in preserving for us an authoritative account of the work of God in Christ. In keeping with this the biblical books are placed by Christians in a class by themselves and are regarded as Holy Scripture because they are the primary witness to and the interpretation of the sequence of historical events, culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ and His church in which Christians believe that God was working out His purpose and achieving the salvation of mankind.

In fixing the canon of the Scriptures, the church acknowledged that she was the serv-

ant, not the creator, of the gospel, and thereby bound herself to be loyal to the apostolic witness as it had been committed to her faithful keeping by the apostles themselves. In recognizing the authority of the biblical witness to Christ, the church believed that she was inspired and guided by that same Spirit who spoke by the prophets and the apostles.

For all of mankind who are removed in time from the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and from their authentic interpretation, they are accessible only in the Scriptures. We may therefore say that the Bible is the sole and authentic source of man's knowledge of the saving work of God in Christ. The biblical documents are the only firsthand historical attestations concerning those events which provide the key to the Christian's understanding of God and His dealings with man and the world.

The necessity of the Scriptures arises from the fact that Christianity is a historical religion and the church is the keeper and guardian of a historical testimony which she can neither alter nor augment. The church and the Bible belong together and either is meaningless without the other.

Since the books of the Bible were written by men in a specific period in history their writings share the characteristics of all other human documents. Yet, the biblical writers are witnesses chosen of God. It stands to reason, therefore, that both their multiplicity and the form in which they present their message must be considered as relevant to our faith. Since God has chosen the biblical books as the means of imparting to us His message and salvation, their human character cannot be considered as impairing the truth and efficacy of the Bible. The relation of divine function and human nature in the Bible has to be interpreted after the analogy of the incarnate Son of God.

The human character of the Bible is the reason why it cannot be exempt from historical criticism. Revelation accommodated itself to man's nature and worldly conditions, entered into man's consciousness in a specific historic situation, and came to concrete expression in some oratorical or literary form current at the time of its entry into the world. Thus, we can observe in Scripture various historical forms (chronicling, autobiography, biography, schematized history, and history written from a theological perspective) and literary forms (epic, drama, poetry, parable, letter, short stories). From one point of view, the Bible is history or literature and must subject itself to the methods ordinarily used in studying such disciplines; from the other point of view, it is special revelation, *biblos*—a book, or *graphie*—a writing. To look at the Bible without seeing these things may lead us to be so preoccupied with theological doctrines that we fail to see the historical situation out of which the statement grew and the literary form in which it was written, both of which control its meaning.

II. Inspiration

There is necessarily a close connection between revelation and inspiration. The one without the other is incomplete. Since man's salvation is the aim of God's proclaiming the biblical message, God has taken care to raise up reliable witnesses to the constituent events and to secure a careful preservation of the documents. The specific function of inspiration is to preserve revelation in a trustworthy and sufficient form to serve its divine purpose. Inspiration is the activity of the Holy Spirit in securing for the church the Scriptures in such a form that the church may trust its verbal form as an adequate, authentic, and sufficient vehicle of special revelation. The Scriptures do not, however, describe or define the mode of

the Spirit's operation in inspiration, and therefore statements in this regard must be made with modesty and caution.

Nevertheless, to recognize that the Scriptures give no precise definition of inspiration does not mean that we should not examine this question more fully in order to ascertain the extreme views which must be avoided in this matter.

We must reject the view that inspiration in Scripture is no more than inspiration that has come to other writers of great literature and can be attributed to human genius. The Scriptures are not inspired just because they are inspiring.

We must also reject the view that the writers of Scripture were so under the influence of the Holy Spirit that they lost their own personal abilities and qualities and became passive agents receiving that which was dictated to them by God, i.e., a mechanical view of inspiration.

We must reject all attempts to formulate a specific view of the mode of inspiration with a view to thereby guaranteeing to ourselves the authority of Scripture. All theories of inspiration must remain attempts on our part to explain or understand the authority the Scriptures do in fact have.

We must avoid all attempts to fragmentize the Scriptures in regarding only that part of the Scriptures to be authoritative in which we have received special illumination.

God and man both participated in the production of Scripture. There is, therefore, both a divine and a human side to inspiration, which has often been compared to the divine and human aspects of the nature of Christ. Just as it is impossible for us to explain how the humanity and deity of Christ were combined in one person, so also the way in which the divine and human elements in Scripture are combined is difficult for us to understand. Inspiration is, therefore, of such a nature that the

divine purpose of Scripture is fulfilled and that it becomes "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16).

In considering Scripture as an adequate vehicle of special revelation consideration needs to be given to the question of the inerrancy of Scripture. Any concept of inerrancy dare not be approached from the standpoint of scientific methodology of empirical proof, but must be formulated on the basis of an inductive study of the Scriptures themselves. Then we can speak in terms of the inerrancy of Scripture if it is clear that it conforms to what we actually find in the Scriptures and guard against a misrepresentation of the term.

Inerrancy cannot mean uniform selection of incident between the various authors who wrote the books. It cannot mean this, because the Bible contains parallel accounts of different happenings, and these do not always agree in detail. The four Gospels unite in reporting certain happenings in Christ's life, but in the details they vary.

Inerrancy cannot preclude the use of figurative and symbolic language. Although everything in Scripture is there because it is a part of God's revelation, it does not follow that everything in the Bible is to be taken literally.

It cannot mean technical precision according to the vocabulary of modern science. The human authors of the books were all ancients. Their vocabulary was that of their own day. They did not pretend to foresee modern science. Had they used such language, they would not have been understood in their own day. We therefore cannot look for this kind of scientific inerrancy.

It does not mean that precise and accurate measurements of time will always be indicated like those to which we have become accustomed

in our scientific age. In its reporting of the happenings of the past, the Bible fits into the framework of ancient, oriental chronology. This is especially true in the Old Testament where the interweaving of the reigns of kings and the dovetailing of events in the past become very intricate. Such matters do not, however, affect the essential truth of the accounts that are given.

As is obvious from the above statement, which seeks to explain what it does not mean, the term *inerrancy* is often interpreted to mean different things to different people. It is wise, therefore, to stay with biblical terminology in speaking about the authority, inspiration, trustworthiness, and infallibility of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are clear in their testimony that they are "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16) and that "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). Jesus himself stated that "the scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35) and that His words will not pass away though heaven and earth pass away (Matt. 24:35; cf. Matt. 5:18).

III. Interpretation

Even though God has disclosed himself in Scripture, this does not preclude the necessity of our interpreting the record that has been given to us. Doctrine and theology are the result of our attempt to interpret the Scriptures and to make them relevant to the time and age in which we live. Much strife and disunity in the body of Christ stems, however, from the fact that Christians have differed in their interpretation of Scripture. We do well, therefore, to pay more heed to sound principles of interpretation as we seek to expound the Scriptures in our own day.

We must recognize that some of the great doctrines basic to the Christian faith have been

given expression in the great creeds of the church—doctrines such as the Trinity and the divine-human nature of Christ. This does not mean that these doctrines cannot be more fully understood and more adequately expressed; nor do they take precedence over the Scriptures, but they are a guide for the church of the present as it seeks to direct itself by the light of the Scriptures and its experience through the centuries. To go counter to the basic affirmations that the church has found essential for its existence in the past should give occasion for a serious re-examination of our own interpretation.

We must approach the study of Scripture in humble dependence on the Holy Spirit. In interpreting Scripture the work of the Holy Spirit must be recognized. Without the Spirit, the Bible is a dead letter. It sets before us the record of the revelation of God in Christ, but apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in us it does not result in saving and edifying knowledge. The Bible is not truly apprehended except through faith by the Holy Spirit. In order to have a proper interpretation, we must be enlightened by the same Spirit that worked through the apostles and prophets when the Scriptures were first written. Luther says, "The Bible cannot be mastered by study and talent; you must rely on the influx of the Spirit." This work of the Spirit will issue in spiritual certainty which is stronger than sense or reason, for it is only through the illumination of the Spirit that we can know the certainty of revealed truth.

The history of the biblical books shows a gradual unfolding of the implications and applications of divine purpose. The Bible in all its component parts has but one message, viz., that God intends the salvation of His creatures. The oneness of this message is apprehended only when the Bible is interpreted as the record of divinely wrought history culminating

in Jesus Christ, so that all component parts point to His work. No portion of the Bible that is interpreted apart from its relation to this central message is adequately understood.

The Bible has been entrusted by God to the church as His chosen people, not to individuals as individuals. The meaning of the Bible cannot be truly apprehended except as mediated through the living and believing fellowship of the Spirit. Thus, the task of interpretation is not limited to stating what the author of a biblical book had in mind at the moment of writing. Each book must also be interpreted within the fellowship of believers in accord with the light given to the church by the Spirit in a given time or situation. In other words, the interpretation is not complete until it has been related to our own time under the guidance of the Spirit.

The Bible is to be interpreted in view of the fact that it is divine truth given through the human mind. The Bible was written in a specific language, at a specific time, in a specific culture, and in the thought forms of a specific period. Much help and enlightenment can here be received through the rightful use of historical criticism. It helps us to think ourselves into the writer's position and to understand the historical background.

In our interpretation we must discover the meaning of a passage from the Scriptures and not read our prior conception into it. Scripture must be interpreted with Scripture. Where there are difficulties of interpretation precedence should be given to the clearest and most evident interpretation of a passage. Thus, Scripture must be interpreted harmoniously or after the analogy of faith, that is, any one passage must be checked against the teaching of the rest of Scripture.

The Old Testament and New Testament are organically united as parts of the one word of God. The Old Testament writers proclaim

the saving purpose of God and point more or less directly to its full actualization in Christ without actually knowing Jesus Christ. The work of Christ, on the other hand, can be truly understood only as the fulfillment of the Old Covenant, and thus the New Testament must be interpreted as the final outcome of holy history.

Obscure passages in the Scriptures should give way to clear passages. We must be willing to suspend our judgment on difficult passages because of the incompleteness of our knowledge both of the Bible and of modern science and criticism. We need not feel compelled to give an immediate final answer to every difficulty that confronts us in the study of the Scriptures. There is no such a thing as an exhaustive exegesis of any passage. The Holy Spirit is constantly showing men facets of revealed truth not understood before. In the same way the "findings" of science are also in constant flux.

In the use of the Bible in doctrinal and theological study, we must seek to make explicit for our own day the great truths of redemption. It must therefore be a christo-centric approach and the main burden will rest on the New Testament, the capstone of revelation. Grammatical exegesis must be undertaken before a system of doctrine develops in doctrinal formulations. This will mean that the literal meaning of the Bible is to be the first and controlling interpretation and other interpretations only as they are called forth by the text and context.

The theological interpreter strives for a coherent system of interlocking propositions. All such formulations should, however, be checked against the doctrinal tradition of the church and the exegesis of the same passages by exegetes of the past as well as against the findings of secular studies.

Unusual care must be taken in the theologi-

cal use of proof-texting. We must certainly support what we say with the text of Scripture, but such text, prior to its use, must be exegetically examined so that there is a genuine justification for its use. Each text is controlled in turn by the context and must be interpreted in the light of it.

In the interpretation of prophecy we must determine, first of all, the background of the prophet and the prophecy. All the tools of research should be used to unveil the historical situation, meaning of names, geographic places, customs, culture, topography, etc.

As to the text, we need to determine whether it is didactic or foreshadowing a future event. If it is predictive we need to see whether it is already fulfilled or not, or whether it is conditional. If prophecy is fulfilled in history, this becomes our guide. In the New Testament prophecy may be spoken of as literally fulfilled, it may be used to prove or explain a point, or it may illustrate a New Testament truth. If a passage is conditional it may or may not be fulfilled, and, if it is not fulfilled, the great variety of usages in the New Testament cautions us not to use any one general rule of thumb for the interpretation.

In the whole area of interpretation it must be recognized that there will be different interpretations given to specific passages by different persons. There must, however, be a recognition of the fact that where two interpretations do not agree, they cannot both be right. We must in that situation continue to search for more light on the basis of a careful exegesis of Scripture. Mutual exhortation is fully in order until there is basic agreement. Where there is a difference in interpretation we must guard against the error of immediately assuming that one or the other does not believe in the authority or inspiration of the Scripture. Both parties may have an equally high view of the authority and inspiration of Scripture.

Much more needs to be done in the area of hermeneutics than has been done heretofore. Were we to have greater unanimity on how to rightly interpret Scripture, many of the disagreements between Christians and denominations would cease to exist.

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